Wittgenstein and the groundlessness of our believing

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WITTGENSTEIN AND THE GROUNDLESSNESS OF OUR BELIEVING

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"*The difficulty is to realise the groundlessness of our believing.*"
(Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, §166)

ABSTRACT. In his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein offers a distinctive conception of the nature of reasons. Central to this conception is the idea that at the heart of our rational practices are essentially arational commitments. This proposal marks a powerful challenge to the standard picture of the structure of reasons. In particular, it has been thought that this account might offer us a resolution of the traditional scepticism/anti-scepticism debate. It is argued, however, that some standard ways of filling out the details of this proposal ultimately lead to an epistemology which is highly problematic. The goal here is to present a more compelling version of Wittgenstein's account of the structure of reasons which can evade these difficulties.

0. INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Wittgenstein's final notebooks—published as *On Certainty*[1]—are fragmentary affairs, unedited by the man himself for public consumption and almost certainly concerned in places with distinct (though superficially similar) philosophical issues.[2] There is thus a limit to the extent to which we can reasonably extract an argument from these remarks which we can attribute with full confidence to Wittgenstein. Nonetheless, there is one particular train of thought in *On Certainty* that can be delineated and which we could plausibly claim is a *Wittgensteinian* proposal, and that is a radically new conception of the structure of reasons. Many have seen in this proposal a way of dealing with the problem of radical scepticism. The problem, however, is to spell-out this account of the structure of reasons in such a way that it doesn't generate unwelcome epistemological

consequences. My goal is to offer a new way of thinking about this Wittgensteinian line on reasons, one that I maintain avoids many of the pitfalls of current renderings.

1. WITTGENSTEIN ON THE STRUCTURE OF REASONS

One key strand in Wittgenstein's thinking in *On Certainty* is the claim that in order for something to be a ground for doubt it is essential that it be more certain than that which it is calling into doubt, since otherwise one would have a better epistemic basis for rejecting the ground for doubt than for rejecting the belief which is the target of the doubt. Consider:

> "If a blind man were to ask me "Have you got two hands?" I should not make sure by looking. If I were to have any doubt of it, then I don't know why I should trust my eyes. For why shouldn't I test my *eyes* by looking to find out whether I see my two hands? *What* is to be tested by *what*?" (OC, §125)

Wittgenstein's point here is that since nothing is more certain (in normal circumstances) as that one has two hands, so one cannot ground a doubt in this proposition, as any such ground (e.g., that one cannot see one's hands) will be at least as open to doubt as the target proposition. A consequence of this way of thinking about doubt is that that which we are most certain of—what Wittgenstein refers to as 'framework' or 'hinge' propositions,[3] for reasons that will soon become apparent—is logically immune to rational doubt since by definition any ground for doubt in these propositions would be itself more dubitable than the target proposition itself.

One immediate consequence of this claim is that it directly undermines any form of scepticism—such as Cartesian scepticism—which is explicitly aimed at fostering universal doubt, since on this view such universal doubt is impossible. As Wittgenstein puts the point at one juncture, "a doubt that doubted everything is not even a doubt." (OC, §450) Indeed, on this basis one might be tempted to read Wittgenstein as using this point about the need for doubts to be grounded in reasons as a way of motivating a general anti-scepticism. Wittgenstein is quite clear, however, that the anti-sceptical import of this thesis concerning doubt is in an important extent limited, and here is where a second key strand in his thinking becomes important. For Wittgenstein argues that the constraints that apply to doubts apply with just as much force to beliefs. That is, just as grounds for doubt need to be more certain than the target proposition that is doubted, so grounds for belief need to be more certain than the target proposition which is believed since otherwise they can't be coherently thought to be playing the required supporting role. A direct consequence of this point is that just as one cannot rationally doubt that which one is most certain of, so one cannot rationally believe it either, and this, as Wittgenstein notes, undermines a certain kind of anti-scepticism.

Take, for example, G. E. Moore's (1939; cf. Moore 1925) famous commonsense defence of his anti-sceptical beliefs. Moore thinks that he has an adequate rational basis for his beliefs in those propositions which he is most certain of—so-called 'Moorean' propositions, such as that he has two hands—but Wittgenstein argues that this is incoherent. As he puts it:

> "My having two hands is, in normal circumstances, as certain as anything that I could produce in evidence for it.
>
> That is why I am not in a position to take the sight of my hands as evidence for it." (OC, §250)

If one's belief that one has two hands could be rationally supported by one's beliefs about what one presently sees—which are *ex hypothesi* less certain—then were one not to see one's hand when one looks for them then this would be a reason to doubt that one has hands. But of course in normal circumstances not seeing your hands when you look for them is more of a reason to doubt your eyesight than to doubt that you have hands. This shows, claims Wittgenstein, that that which we are most certain of is not rationally supported at all, but is rather the hinge relative to which we rationally evaluate—and thus "test"—other propositions.

Moreover (and note that this is a key strand in his thinking, one that is often overlooked), Wittgenstein is very explicit that it is not an incidental part of our epistemic practices that there are these hinge propositions which, in virtue of being maximally certain, are immune to either rational doubt or rational support. Instead, he claims that it is *essential* to any belief-system that there are propositions which play this hinge role, since the very practice of offering reasons, whether in support of belief or as a basis for doubt, presupposes these hinge commitments. Indeed, this is the whole point of the hinge metaphor:

> "[...] the *questions* that we raise and our *doubts* depend upon the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were like hinges on which those turn.
>
> That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are *in deed* not doubted.
>
> But it isn't that the situation is like this: We just *can't* investigate everything, and for that reason we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put." (OC, §§341-3)

Wittgenstein's claim is thus that there is no prospect that there might be a belief-system which somehow managed to avoid such commitments, for just as a door needs hinges in order to turn, so rational evaluation requires these hinge commitments in order to be possible at all. As he puts it, "it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things are not doubted." (OC, §342)

The upshot of this claim is that there simply is no such thing as a universal rational evaluation of our beliefs, whether positive (/anti-sceptical) or negative (/sceptical), since all such

evaluations must take place in the context of hinge propositions which are themselves immune to rational evaluation. All rational evaluation is thus essentially *local*, in the sense that it necessarily presupposes arational hinge commitments.

The claim that it is necessarily the case that all rational evaluation is local marks out Wittgenstein's treatment of the Cartesian sceptical problem from superficially similar treatments, such as the 'ordinary language' response offered by J. L. Austin (1961). For while Austin clearly shows that our practices of rational evaluation are very different from the austere practices employed by the Cartesian sceptic who engages in universal doubt, this is not enough to defuse the sceptical threat from this quarter. After all, the Cartesian sceptic is not claiming that their doubt is something that would arise in the context of a normal inquiry, since it is precisely part of their view that normal inquiries lack the kind of generality that generates the relevant sceptical conclusion. But so long as the Cartesian sceptic's conception of rational evaluation is a 'purified' version of our ordinary practices of rational evaluation, as she maintains, then it seems that she is on very strong ground to resist the claim made by proponents of the ordinary language response to this sceptical problem that we should privilege our ordinary practices of rational evaluation over the practices that she employs. Indeed, if anything, this way of thinking about the Cartesian sceptic's practices of rational evaluation would privilege *them* over our ordinary practices (i.e., if only we were more thorough, had more time, had less practical limitations etc., then we would employ the Cartesian sceptic's practices of rational evaluation rather than our own).[4]

It is in this context that Wittgenstein's claim that it is part of the very logic of our practices of rational evaluation that we are committed to hinge propositions becomes so important, since it entails that the Cartesian sceptic's practice of engaging in a universal (and hence 'hinge-less') rational evaluation is ruled-out *tout court*. In particular, on this view the entirely general rational evaluation conducted by the Cartesian sceptic simply cannot be a purified version of our ordinary processes of rational evaluation. Indeed, it is shown to be a kind of rational evaluation which is impossible.[5]

Wittgenstein is thus offering us a challenging conception of the structure of reasons, such that our reason-giving practices presuppose a class of fundamental hinge commitments which are by their nature immune to rational evaluation. The upshot of this argument is that there cannot be a satisfactory rational way of terminating the regress of reasons, since at some point in the regress one will inevitably encounter those propositions which one is most certain of—the hinge propositions—and yet these propositions by their very nature cannot be rationally supported. Reasons come to an end, but they do not come to end with further reasons of a special foundational sort. Instead, when we reach bedrock we discover only a rationally groundless "animal" commitment (OC, §359), a kind of "primitive" trust. (OC, §475)

2. THE CORE PROBLEM FOR THE WITTGENSTEINIAN ACCOUNT OF THE STRUCTURE OF REASONS

While Wittgenstein's account of the structure of reasons seems on the face of it to have tremendous anti-sceptical potential, the problems emerge once we start to spell-out what this view amounts to. One very general concern that is particularly pressing is that any anti-sceptical proposal cast along these lines looks susceptible to ultimately collapsing into the very radical scepticism that it was meant to evade. In particular, from a sceptical point of view it is hard to see just what is so *anti*-sceptical about the claim that the structure of reasons is ultimately supported by arational commitments. Isn't that just what the radical sceptic claims? But if so, then how is this view to be distinguished from radical scepticism, exactly?

We can bring this general concern about the Wittgensteinian proposal into sharper relief by considering how one's hinge commitments are related to one's non-hinge commitments. The latter are, presumably, beliefs in the normal way, and for that matter are meant to be (ordinarily) supported by reasons. The former, however, are a more controversial class. They can't be supported by reasons if Wittgenstein is right (reasons for thinking the target proposition true, anyway—the point of this distinction will become clearer below). But now we face a puzzle. For is it not possible, at least in some cases, to reason one's way from rationally-held belief in non-hinge propositions to beliefs in the propositions at issue in hinge commitments (i.e., reason one's way to belief in a hinge proposition)? But if that's right, then why can't one's hinge commitments be thought of as rationally held beliefs after all (and thus, potentially anyway, rationally held knowledge)? Conversely, if Wittgenstein is right that such rational support for our hinge commitments is impossible, then doesn't that undermine the idea of even 'local' rational support too, such that local rational support is ultimately no rational support at all?

In order to put some flesh onto the bones here, let's take a concrete example, based on one that Wittgenstein himself discusses (see OC, §183). One can surely know on the basis of reasons that Napoleon won the battle of Austerlitz in 1805. But a relevant hinge commitment in the background here on the Wittgensteinian picture is presumably that the Earth has been in existence for a relatively long time, and didn't just spring into existence in the last five minutes replete with the traces of a distant ancestry. *Qua* hinge commitment, this is not the kind of commitment that could be rationally supported. And that seems right, since what could rationally support such a commitment, given that it is in effect the denial of radical sceptical scenario? Any reasonably reflective agent could presumably recognise, however, that their knowledge of the historical claim regarding Napoleon's victory entails the denial of the target 'historical' radical sceptical hypothesis. But if the former is rationally supported, then what is stopping this agent from inferring, on this

rational basis, that the latter anti-sceptical claim must obtain also? Moreover, once such an inference is made, doesn't our agent thereby have a rationally grounded belief in a hinge proposition (something which Wittgenstein claims is impossible)?

It is worthwhile making explicit the principle that is being appealed to here, which we will call the *transmission principle*:

The Transmission Principle
If *S* knows that φ in virtue of rational support *R*, and *S* competently deduces ψ from φ, thereby forming her belief that ψ on the basis of this competent deduction while retaining her *R*-supported knowledge that φ, then *S* knows that ψ in virtue of *R*.[6]

That is, if one knows that Napoleon won the battle of Austerlitz in 1805 in virtue of possessing a certain body of rational support (e.g., the testimony of reliable historical records, and so on), and one competently deduces on this basis that the universe did not come into existence five minutes ago, then via this principle one ought to have a rational basis which suffices for knowing the deduced proposition (i.e., the very rational basis which supported one's knowledge of the antecedent proposition).

Transmission looks eminently plausible. In particular, it is hard to see how one would go about denying this principle. How could it be that knowledge-sufficient rational support could not 'transmit' across competent deductions in this way? Indeed, if this principle is rejected then it becomes mysterious how we are apparently able to use competent deductions to extend our rationally grounded knowledge.

But with this principle in play it ought to be possible for the rationally articulate subject to undertake competent deductions from their rationally supported knowledge of non-hinge propositions and in doing so gain rationally supported knowledge of hinge propositions. Since this would clearly be unacceptable on the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of reasons, the upshot is that either this principle has to go or else one must deny that the non-hinge beliefs in these cases are rationally supported, and neither claim is particularly appealing. Indeed, to take the latter route seems to be to straightforwardly concede that the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of reasons cannot deal with the problem of rational scepticism, since it is tantamount to allowing that 'local' rational support is ultimately no rational support at all. We are thus faced with a dilemma between, on the one hand, giving in to radical scepticism, and, on the other hand, rejecting a highly intuitive epistemic principle. Call this dilemma the *transmission problem* for the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of reasons.[7]

3. THREE WAYS OF DEVELOPING THE WITTGENSTEINIAN ACCOUNT OF THE STRUCTURE OF REASONS

There are three main ways of developing Wittgenstein's proposal in the contemporary literature, and each of them struggles to answer the transmission problem.

The first proposal is to ally the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of reasons to a form of epistemic externalism which allows that one can have knowledge even in the absence of supporting reasons (call this the *externalist reading*). On this view, knowledge can be sometimes 'brute', at least from a rational point of view. The merit of taking this line is that we needn't conclude from the fact that hinges lack rational support that they are thereby unknown.

Part of the attraction of developing Wittgenstein's proposal along these lines is that it potentially gives one a principled basis for rejecting the transmission principle, and hence avoiding the transmission problem just set out. In particular, it is claimed that while Wittgenstein's conception of the structure of reasons is incompatible with the transmission principle, it is nonetheless entirely compatible with a related principle, known as the *closure principle*:

The Closure Principle
If *S* knows that φ, and *S* competently deduces ψ from φ, thereby forming her belief that ψ on the basis of this competent deduction while retaining her knowledge that φ, then *S* knows that ψ.[8]

Whereas the transmission principle demands that one's knowledge-sufficient rational support should transfer across competent deductions, the closure principle merely demands that one's knowledge should transfer across competent deductions (such that one can extend one's knowledge by employing competent deductions). So, for example, the closure principle demands that if one knows that Napoleon won the battle of Austerlitz in 1805, and one competently deduces on this basis that the universe did not come into existence five minutes ago, then one also knows the entailed proposition. What the closure principle doesn't demand, however—unlike the transmission principle—is that the knowledge-sufficient rational support available to the subject when it comes to the entailing proposition should transfer across the competent deduction to be knowledge-sufficient rational support for the entailed proposition.

As such, the closure principle is even more compelling than the transmission principle, since it demands less. With that in mind, however, one might be tempted to hold that we can live with the rejection of the transmission principle just so long as we can retain the closure principle. In particular, if one can appeal to epistemic externalism in order to make sense of the idea that hinge propositions can be known even despite their lack of rational support, then we can in principle allow the closure-based inference to knowledge of a hinge proposition even while denying the

transmission-based inference to *rationally supported* knowledge of a hinge proposition. One could then diagnose the appeal of the transmission principle as arising out of a failure to recognise that it is a stronger epistemic principle than the closely related closure principle.

Indeed, from an epistemically externalist perspective it is open to one to argue that the transmission principle is independently dubious because it illicitly incorporates epistemic internalist commitments. If, as the epistemic externalist maintains, not all knowledge is rationally grounded, then why should we hold that the process of extending our knowledge via competent deduction should guarantee that the knowledge-supporting rational basis for the entailing proposition should always transfer to be a knowledge-supporting rational basis for the entailed proposition? The upshot would be that while it would indeed on this view be intellectually disastrous to deny the closure principle, so long as one can retain that principle one could live with the rejection of the transmission principle.[9]

There are several problems with the externalist reading, and I will focus here on two key worries. The first is a general concern about the plausibility of denying the transmission principle. For while I agree that it would be even more problematic to deny the closure principle, it remains that rejecting even the transmission principle has *prima facie* costs. For example, such a denial appears to commit us to (a variant of) what Keith DeRose (1995) has called 'abominable conjunctions'. That is, rejecting the transmission principle in the way suggested seems to commit us to endorsing conjunctions such as 'I have excellent reasons for believing that Napoleon won the battle of Austerlitz in 1805, but have no reason whatsoever for believing that the Universe was in existence at this time'.[10] At the very least, in denying the transmission principle one also needs to further show that these conjunctions are not as bizarre as they at first appear.

A related issue in this regard is that the supposed epistemic externalist motivation for denying the transmission principle is not very plausible on closer inspection. Epistemic externalists do not deny that there can be rationally supported knowledge, and the thesis motivating the transmission principle is only that when it comes to this specific type of knowledge the rational support should transfer across the relevant competent deduction. There therefore seems no inherent reason why this should be in conflict with epistemic externalism, specifically.

A second concern about this strategy is more specific to the details of the proposal. For notice that while epistemic externalism can open up the theoretical space within which we can make sense of an agent's possessing knowledge even in the absence of reasons, it still remains to be shown that the target beliefs amount to knowledge by externalist lights. The problem, however, is that it is hard to see how such an account would go.

Consider, for example, the prospects of developing this account along process reliabilist lines.[11] The problem is that it doesn't seem at all plausible to suppose that we know hinge

propositions in virtue of forming the target beliefs via a reliable belief-forming process. Indeed, our hinge commitments do not seem to be the product of *any* specific kind of belief-forming process, but are rather part of the backdrop against which we acquire our beliefs in non-hinge propositions. For example, my hinge commitment to the universe having not come into existence five minutes ago was not acquired via a specific cognitive process, but is rather something which is presupposed in the specific cognitive processes by which I come to acquire particular historical beliefs, such as that Napoleon's victory at Austerlitz was in 1805. If that's the right way to think about hinge commitments, however, then it's going to be hard to tell even an externalist-friendly story about how one might have knowledge of hinge propositions, since whatever externalist epistemology we opt for will inevitably assess this putative knowledge by evaluating the epistemic credentials of the manner in which it was acquired.[12]

A second way of developing Wittgenstein's account of the structure of reasons is cast along epistemic internalist lines. Like the epistemic externalist strategy, this proposal also argues that one can have knowledge of hinge propositions even while lacking adequate rational support for believing these propositions to be true. Accordingly, this stance also rejects the transmission principle while retaining the closure principle. What is distinctive about this proposal is that rather than grounding our putative knowledge of hinge propositions in externalist epistemic support it instead appeals to a kind of rational—and thus, in principle at least, internalistically respectable—epistemic support, albeit a special kind of rational support which does not consist in reasons for thinking the target propositions to be true. This special kind of rational support is known as *entitlement*. Accordingly, call this the *entitlement reading*.[13]

In essence, the idea is that where we are obliged, on pain of cognitive paralysis, to be committed to certain propositions which we have no reason for thinking are true, then, so long there is no reason available for thinking those propositions to be false, one has a default rational basis—an *entitlement*—for these commitments. After all, or so the thinking goes anyway, one is surely rational in avoiding cognitive paralysis, and hence in cases where one has no reason to believe that not-*p*, and where a failure to believe that *p* would result in cognitive paralysis, it is arguably rational to believe that *p* even when one has no rational basis for believing that *p* is true. Thus a lack of rational basis for the truth of a proposition is compatible, on this view, with there being a rational basis for believing it nonetheless. And hence there is an epistemic basis on which one can know this proposition too (even, potentially, by epistemic internalist lights, since the story told here is an entirely *rational* story).

In this way the entitlement reading can motivate the claim that we can know hinge propositions. And if we can know hinge propositions, then in principle at least we can retain the closure principle. That is, it will no longer follow that agents who undertake competent deductions

from their rationally held beliefs in non-hinge propositions to belief in hinge propositions fall foul of this principle by necessarily failing to know the deduced propositions, since it is now an open question whether they know these deduced hinge propositions (it depends on whether the respective hinge beliefs enjoy entitlement). But the transmission principle does have to go on this view, as it remains the case that one cannot have a rational basis for believing hinge propositions to be true, no matter what competent deductions one has made. Thus the rational basis we have for believing the entailing proposition to be true cannot be thought to transfer across a competent deduction to be a rational basis for believing the entailed hinge proposition to be true.

There are a number of problems with the entitlement reading, but the overarching concern is that it does not ultimately offer us the kind of epistemic support which could suffice for knowledge of hinge propositions. This is important, since it is only if the entitlement reading can preserve knowledge of hinge propositions that it is able to retain the closure principle, and the retention of the closure principle is meant to be something that by the lights of this approach is non-negotiable.

One way of putting this worry is to say that the rational basis for believing hinge propositions provided by this strategy is of a *pragmatic* rather than *epistemic* nature, on the grounds that it is ultimately a rational basis rooted in the prudential value of believing these propositions rather than being a rational basis for thinking these propositions true.[14] But this is too quick. For while it is true that an entitlement to believe does not on this view involve a reason for believing the target proposition to be true, such an entitlement is meant to be rooted in a rational perspective which is purely epistemic. That is, the claim is that given that not believing hinge propositions would result in cognitive paralysis (and given also that there is no reason for thinking these propositions false), then from a *purely epistemic point of view* it is rational to believe hinge propositions (cognitive paralysis is, after all, something that it is *epistemically* rational to avoid). Accordingly, it is not at all clear that the rationality at issue in this proposal is ultimately prudential as opposed to being epistemic.

But the worry about epistemic *versus* prudential rationality in play here is indicative of a deeper problem, which is the very idea of a belief being rationally grounded in something like an entitlement. To believe a proposition, after all, is to believe that proposition *to be true*. But if that's right then there is something very puzzling about an entitlement being an epistemic reason to believe a proposition without at the same time being an epistemic reason to believe that proposition to be true.

It is for this reason that proponents of this strategy talk of the propositional commitment in play as being something distinct from belief, such as a *trusting* in or an *acceptance* of a proposition.[15] After all, one can make sense of one trusting or accepting a proposition which one is aware that

one has no reason for thinking is true because one independently recognises some epistemic benefit in doing so. This is because trusting in or acceptance of a proposition only commits one to acting *as if* the proposition in question is true, and does not commit one to actually regarding it as true. But this manoeuvre just trades one problem with another, for the obvious worry now is that one needs to believe a proposition if one is to have knowledge of it; mere trust or acceptance of that proposition will not suffice.[16] If that's right, however, then one who takes this line is forced to grant that the hinge propositions are not known after all, and hence the strategy is undermined. In particular, the proponent of this strategy is now forced to deny not just the transmission principle but also the closure principle.

This leaves a third way of developing the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of reasons in the contemporary literature, one that is arguably closer in spirit to what Wittgenstein himself had in mind (to the extent that we can discern such a thing from these fragmentary notebooks). According to this proposal, we need to take very seriously how Wittgenstein talks of these commitments as being utterly visceral—or "animal" (e.g., OC, §359)—in nature. With this in mind, we are not to think of them as beliefs at all, or indeed any other kind of propositional attitude either for that matter. Rather, they represent ways of *acting* rather than a particular kind of belief (see, e.g., OC, §204 & §402). On this view there is a very good reason why we do not have knowledge of hinge propositions—there simply isn't the corresponding propositional attitude which could put us in the market for knowledge of these propositions in the first place. Call this the *non-propositional reading*.[17]

The key difficulty facing the non-propositional reading is to see how it ultimately amounts to anything more than simply embracing a mystery. We wanted to know how it could be that we could fail to know these propositions, given the role they play in our intellectual practices (as highlighted by the relevant inferences involving the closure and transmission principles). But this line responds by simply reaffirming that we cannot know such propositions, and does so in such a way as to make clear that there could be no intellectual role for the relevant commitments to play. But how then are we to make sense of the apparent ease with which we make the relevant inferences? For while it might be plausible to contend that prior to undertaking philosophical reflection we do not form any propositional attitude at all to hinge propositions, it is hard to see how, subsequent to engaging in the relevant philosophical reflection, we can *avoid* adopting a positive propositional attitude to these propositions. How could one recognise that a certain historical event (e.g., the battle of Austerlitz) took place at such-and-such a date, and that this entails that the universe has been around for more than five minutes, and yet not adopt a positive propositional attitude (e.g., belief, or something similar) to the entailed proposition?[18]

4. HINGE COMMITMENTS RECONSIDERED

The Wittgensteinian account of the structure of reasons thus faces a certain difficulty—the transmission problem—and three of the main ways of developing this account founder on this difficulty. What is key to resolving this problem is to realise the precise nature of our hinge commitments. In particular, I want to argue for a way of thinking about the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of reasons which, while broadly in keeping with the non-propositional reading, is able to circumvent some of the mystery which this reading generates. Moreover, this new proposal also has the added advantage of being consistent with the transmission principle, and hence offers a straightforward way of resolving the transmission problem.

Let's start with the myriad hinge commitments that we are held to have. On the face of it, there is such difference in these commitments that it is hard to see what they could possibly have in common. Some are peculiar to oneself, such as that one's name is such-and-such (e.g., OC, §§628-9). Some are specific to one's historical epoch, such as that one has never been to the moon (e.g., OC, §106). And some don't seem specific to anything at all, but are rather very general commitments that we all seem to have, such as that we not presently dreaming (e.g., OC, §676).[19] Given their diversity, we might ask whether they have anything essential in common.

On reflection, it is clear that they do. In particular, what they share is that they each reflect what we might call an *über* hinge commitment on the part of all subjects, regardless of who they are or their personal circumstances—*viz.*, that one is not radically and fundamentally mistaken in one's beliefs. For in all cases a mistake on the part of the subject regarding the target proposition would entail massive and fundamental error in the subject's beliefs. The über hinge commitment thus entails a hinge commitment to these specific propositions as well. We are now in a position to explain why some hinge commitments are specific to an individual (or to an individual's cultural milieu, and so on), since the class of specific hinge commitments effectively simply codifies what the agent's über hinge commitment amounts to given her particular set of beliefs. That is, if one lives during an historical period in which it is widely held that no-one has ever been to the moon, then that one has never been to the moon is a natural consequence of one's über hinge commitment.

If we focus for a moment on the über hinge commitment, it ought to be clear why such a commitment must necessarily be groundless. For whatever one offered by way of rational support for such a commitment would clearly already presuppose the truth of this commitment. The groundlessness of the non-über hinge commitments then follows in virtue of the fact just noted that they effectively simply codify that agent's groundless über hinge commitment.

A further point to notice about the über hinge commitment is how plausible it is to suppose in this case—in line with the non-propositional reading of Wittgenstein noted above—that this commitment is not to be thought of as a belief, at least if Wittgenstein is right that radical doubt of the sort that would be involved in failing to have this commitment would "drag everything with it and plunge it into chaos" (OC, §613). That is, if one is to have any commitments at all—and indeed, any beliefs or doubts—then by Wittgensteinian lights the über hinge commitment must be in place. But that is just to say that it is not the kind of commitment that could ever be responsive to rational considerations, whether in its favour or against it, and it is hard to see how a commitment of that sort could be properly characterised as a belief. (A belief, after all, is a belief that such-and-such is so, and hence is in its nature in principle responsive to rational considerations—i.e., considerations which indicate whether something is so. That is why wishful thinking, even when in all outward respects very alike belief, is not belief).

But if that is the right way to think about the über hinge commitment, then a similar line will apply to the more specific non-über hinge commitments, since they are simply the specific manifestations of the über hinge commitment. The big difference here is that while on this view the über hinge commitment is a necessary part of the backdrop to any rational evaluation, one's more specific hinge commitments can alter over time as one's body of beliefs change. Were travel to the moon to become commonplace, for example, then it would cease to be the case that doubt about whether or not one has ever been to the moon would compromise one's über hinge commitment (e.g., perhaps one went there as a child and was never told?). But it would remain the case that one retains the über hinge commitment to not being radically and fundamentally in error in one's beliefs.

With this observation in place, we are now in a position to offer a variation on the non-propositional reading of *On Certainty* described earlier; what we might term the *non-epistemic reading*. Recall that the non-propositional reading wanted to take the idea that our hinge commitments are "animal" very literally, such that they weren't propositional attitudes at all, and certainly not beliefs. As such they simply weren't the kind of thing that could be in the market for being known. The conception of hinge commitments that we are developing in line with the non-epistemic reading is superficially similar, though notice that there is a key difference. For while we are granting that there is no sense in which we can meaningfully talk of our hinge commitments as being beliefs—and hence we are granting that hinge commitments cannot be in the market for knowledge—we are nonetheless treating them as propositional attitudes.[20] I think this is important to removing the element of mystery in play with regard to the non-propositional reading that we noted earlier, though to see this we need to reconsider the problem posed by the transmission and

closure principles for hinge commitments that we noted above.

First, recall the closure principle:

The Closure Principle
If *S* knows that φ, and *S* competently deduces ψ from φ, thereby forming her belief that ψ on the basis of this competent deduction while retaining her knowledge that φ, then *S* knows that ψ.

The idea was that this principle created a specific problem for the non-propositional reading of hinge commitments, since agents seem perfectly capable of recognising that the propositions expressing these commitments were entailed by non-hinge propositions which they knew, and hence, given this principle, they ought to be in a position to know the hinge propositions after all. Conversely, if the proponent of the non-propositional reading insisted that these propositions could be not be known, then they were bound to either rejecting this highly intuitive principle or else granting that an awful lot of what we take ourselves to know is in fact unknown. The non-propositional reading as set out above denied that hinge commitments could be expressed in terms of a propositional attitude, and so presumably responds to this argument by claiming that the target inference is simply impossible. But given that we do seem very able to formulate the propositions expressed in hinge commitments, and recognise their logical relationships to other propositions which we rationally believe and know, this line does look *prima facie* odd.

The key thing to note about this principle is that it involves an agent *forming* a *belief* on the basis of the relevant competent deduction. This is not an inessential part of the principle, since the motivation for the principle is the idea that the agent can come to acquire new knowledge via the competent deduction where this means that the belief in question is based on that deduction. But with the principle so formulated it becomes clear just why on the non-epistemic reading of hinge commitments we can't pose a problem for these commitments by employing the closure principle. That is, we can't use a closure-based argument to motivate the thought that if ordinary (non-hinge) propositions which we believe are known then so too must be the known to be entailed propositions which express hinge commitments. And the reason for this is not that our hinge commitments cannot express a propositional attitude—on this reading they can, unlike the non-propositional reading—but rather that the propositional attitude in play cannot be a belief, much less the sort of belief that one can acquire through a rational process like a competent deduction.[21]

In this way the non-epistemic reading takes much of the mystery out of the non-propositional reading, while nonetheless preserving its spirit. In particular, it is not denied that agents can recognise the logical relationships between their non-hinge beliefs and the propositions which express their hinge commitments. It is just that no process of this sort can lead to the formation of a belief in a hinge proposition in the way required by this principle on account of

how this rational process already presupposes the relevant arational non-doxastic hinge commitment. As a result, our inability to know hinge propositions is entirely compatible with both our knowledge of non-hinge propositions which entail these hinge propositions and with the closure principle.

We can employ a similar strategy when it comes to the transmission problem as described above. Recall how we formulated the transmission principle:

The Transmission Principle
If *S* knows that φ in virtue of rational support *R*, and *S* competently deduces ψ from φ, thereby forming her belief that ψ on the basis of this competent deduction while retaining her *R*-supported knowledge that φ, then *S* knows that ψ in virtue of *R*.

The formulation of this principle was vital to setting up the problem in play. In particular, this principle was meant to capture the sense in which knowledge-sufficient rational support can 'transmit' across a competent deduction to be knowledge-sufficient rational support for the deduced belief. This principle, while plausible, was meant to create a problem for hinge propositions on account of how one can use this principle to deduce from one's sufficiently rationally-supported knowledge of ordinary (non-hinge) propositions the truth of those propositions which express hinge commitments, and in doing so acquire knowledge-sufficient rational support for hinge propositions. But that claim is clearly in direct conflict with a core thesis regarding hinge propositions, which is that they cannot be rationally supported.

As with the closure principle, however, it is also required by this principle that the agent concerned *forms* her *belief* on the basis of the relevant competent deduction. And, again, this is not an incidental feature of the principle, since without this feature we will not be able to capture the idea that this is a competent deduction which is generating knowledge via the transmission of the relevant rational support, whereby this transmitted rational support is the rational basis for the deduced knowledge. But with this feature in play then it should become clear that one cannot use this principle to generate problems for the non-epistemic reading of hinge commitments that we have proposed. For on this view one cannot believe a hinge proposition, much less believe it on the basis of a rational process such as this. And the reason for this is not that we unable to form propositional attitudes to the proposition expressed in our hinge commitments (as the non-propositional reading would claim), but rather simply that we couldn't form the specific propositional attitude of belief.[22]

As before, this way of dealing with the transmission problem allows the non-epistemic reading to avoid much of the mystery that is prompted that is prompted by the non-propositional reading of hinge commitments. Agents can perfectly well recognise the logical relationships that exist between the ordinary non-hinge propositions which they rationally believe (and know) and

the propositions which express their hinge commitments. The problem is just that recognising these logical relationships cannot be part of a process through which one acquires belief, and thus rational belief, in these hinge propositions.

A final comment is in order regarding the problem of 'abominable conjunctions' that was noted earlier. Isn't there something odd about the idea that one can simultaneously know that Napoleon won the battle of Austerlitz in 1805 while failing to know that the universe did not come into existence five minutes ago? Or, worse, that one has knowledge-sufficient rational support for believing that Napoleon won the battle of Austerlitz in 1805 while failing to have any rational support for thinking that the universe did not come into existence five minutes ago?

There is indeed something odd about these conjunctions, but what this reveals is the manner in which our ordinary epistemic practices disguise the essential locality of rational support. The question of whether the universe has come into existence five minutes ago simply doesn't arise in normal inquiries—"it lies apart from the route travelled by inquiry" (OC, §88)—and this is why these conjunctions strike us as so puzzling. But once we have an account in hand of why such conjunctions are nonetheless true—an account which explains the necessity of the locality of rational support while simultaneously explaining why our hinge commitments cannot be thought of as beliefs—then the puzzlement should subside. While the former proposition is in the market for belief and thus knowledge, the latter proposition, as an expression of our über hinge commitment, is not in the market for belief at all, and hence not for knowledge either.[23,24]

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NOTES

[1] See Wittgenstein (1969). Henceforth we will refer to this work, where applicable, as 'OC'.
[2] For example, as Williams (2004) persuasively points out, the earlier sections (OC, §§1-65) of *On Certainty* are in fact concerned with a very different kind of sceptical problem than much of the rest of the text.
[3] See, for example, OC, §§341-3. Although the "hinge" metaphor is the dominant symbolism in the book, it is accompanied by various other metaphors, such as the following: that these propositions constitute the "scaffolding" of our thoughts (OC, §211); that they form the "foundations of our language-games" (OC, §§401-3); and also that they represent the implicit "world-picture" from within which we inquire, the "inherited background against which [*we*] distinguish between true and false" (OC, §§94-5).
[4] See Stroud (1984, ch. 2) for a subtle defence of this type of objection against ordinary language responses to the sceptical problem, as exemplified by Austin (1961).
[5] I explore this point more fully in Pritchard (*forthcominge*).
[6] While this formulation of the transmission principle is my own, the basic idea behind such a principle is developed in work by Wright (e.g., 2004; cf. Davies 2004). Note that a potential complication that I am setting to one side in this formulation of the transmission principle is whether the competent deduction in play itself contributes any additional rational support to the deduced belief. For the purposes of this formulation it is assumed that even if the rational support for the deduced belief is enhanced in this way, the unenhanced level of rational support will still suffice to support knowledge of the target proposition. If one thought that the enhanced level was required, however, then one would simply need to opt for a more complicated formulation of the transmission principle which made explicit that the rational support that the agent acquires for her belief in the deduced proposition is supplemented by her undertaking the target competent deduction.
[7] A further worry about the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of reasons is that it might licence epistemic relativism. For on this view can't there be distinct epistemic systems which incorporate different hinge commitments and thus generate opposing rational beliefs? But if that is possible, then how is a disagreement amongst two parties who adhere to these respective epistemic systems to be rationally resolved? Interestingly, there are passages in *On Certainty* where Wittgenstein seems acutely aware of this concern (see, e.g., OC, §§611-2). It would take me too far afield to discuss this worry here, though I do think that the reading I offer of Wittgenstein's account of hinge commitments is able to evade it. See Pritchard (2010; *forthcominga*; cf. Pritchard 2009) for more details. For an important recent discussion of the relationship between Wittgenstein's stance on hinge commitments and epistemic relativism, see Williams (2007), to which Pritchard (2010) is effectively a response. See also the significant new treatment of this issue offered by Coliva (2010, *passim*). For some important recent discussions of the problem of epistemic relativism more generally, see Boghossian (2005), Neta (2007) and Lynch (2010).
[8] This is essentially the formulation of the closure principle defended by Williamson (2000, 117) and Hawthorne (2005, 29). For a recent exchange on the merits of the closure principle, see Dretske (2005*a*; 2005*b*; cf. Dretske 1970; 1971; Nozick 1981) and Hawthorne (2005).
[9] For further discussion of the epistemic externalist development of Wittgenstein's account of the structure of reasons, see Pritchard (2001; 2005*b*; *forthcominga*; *forthcominge*). For an influential contextualist variant of the externalist reading, see Williams (e.g., 1991).
[10] Note that DeRose's own 'abominable conjunctions' were specifically targeted at putative counterexamples to the closure principle rather than the transmission principle.
[11] For a key defence of process reliabilism, see Goldman (1986). For a very useful recent survey of work on reliabilism, see Goldman (2008).
[12] Suppose, for example, that one opted for an externalist epistemology cast along modal lines, such as a safety-based theory of knowledge. Crucially, evaluations of whether a belief is safe are made relative to the basis on which the belief is actually formed (i.e., safety is a basis-relative notion). But if our hinge commitments are not the product of any specific belief-forming process, then on what grounds are we to treat these commitments as safe? For a defence of a safety-based theory of knowledge, one that also explicitly treats safety as a basis-relative notion, see Pritchard (2005*a*; 2007; 2011*a*; *forthcomingb*).
[13] The foremost exponent of this proposal is Wright (see, especially, Wright 2004; cf. Davies 2004). Note that this notion of epistemic entitlement is very different to that defended by Burge (1993; 2003) and Peacocke (2003).
[14] In earlier work—see Pritchard (2005)—I pressed such a claim myself. See also Jenkins (2007) and Pedersen (2009).
[15] See Wright (2004, 194) for his discussion of "rational trust" in this regard.
[16] Even Williamson (2000), who holds that knowledge cannot be analysed in terms of belief plus some other conditions (such as truth and an epistemic condition like justification) nonetheless holds that knowledge entails belief. See Williamson (2000, §1.5).
[17] This type of proposal has been recently expounded in some detail in Moyal-Sharrock (2004). See also the highly influential earlier work by McGinn (1989; cf. McGinn 2010) which takes a similar line.
[18] Note that the three-fold taxonomy of readings of *On Certainty* offered here is not meant to be exhaustive, but merely representative of some of the main lines of thought in this regard. For example, consider the rendering offered by Williams (1991). Although this proposal has some affinity with the externalist reading, what makes it distinct is its appeal to a particular variant of epistemic contextualism, what I have elsewhere termed "inferential contextualism" in

order to distinguish it from the semantic form of contextualism defended in the epistemological arena by DeRose (1995), Lewis (1996), Cohen (1999; 2000), and others (see Pritchard 2002*a*; 2002*b*). It would take me too far afield to discuss this reading here. See Pritchard (2005*b*; 2010; *forthcominge*) for further critical discussion of this proposal. Two further distinct renderings of *On Certainty* worthy of note include the *therapeutic* line offered by Conant (1998), whereby the radical sceptic's assertions are strictly senseless, and the *naturalistic* line offered by Strawson (1985), which claims that there is something essentially unnatural about the doubts offered by the radical sceptic. For an excellent recent discussion of the varieties of interpretations of *On Certainty*, see Coliva (2010). See also Brenner & Moyal-Sharrock (2005).

[19] As noted in endnote 2, I bracket here one type of apparently universal hinge commitment suggested in *On Certainty*, which is regarding the existence of the external world (see, e.g., OC §35). Like Williams (e.g., 2004) I think it is a mistake to run Wittgenstein's remarks early on in this text regarding idealism with his later remarks on other hinge commitments. Wittgenstein clearly thought that any expression of outright denial of idealism is senseless in all contexts, unlike hinge commitments which he is willing to grant can have sense in appropriate contexts.

[20] Of course, there might be cases in which the agent concerned, on account of their limited conceptual repertoire and imagination, is unable to form the thought expressed in the über hinge commitment, or even perhaps the thought expressed by some of the non-über hinge commitments. I suspect that for most rational agents this is highly unlikely, but in any case we can reasonably bracket this concern for our purposes.

[21] It follows that even a formulation of the closure principle on which belief in the competently deduced belief was merely *sustained* by the competent deduction, and not the *product* of that deduction, would nonetheless be entirely compatible with the idea that our hinge commitments are arational and concern propositions which are unknown.

[22] In line with the point made in endnote 21, it equally follows from the argument advanced here that any version of the transmission principle on which the competently deduced belief was merely sustained by this deduction, rather than being the product of it, would nonetheless be compatible with the idea that our hinge commitments are arational and thus concern propositions which are unknown.

[23] I further develop the non-epistemic reading of the Wittgensteinian account of the structure of reasons in Pritchard (2011*b*; *forthcominga*). The former develops this reading in the context of the epistemology of religious belief; the latter develops this reading as a viable alternative to the entitlement reading.

[24] An earlier version of this paper was presented at a workshop on entitlement at the *Northern Institute of Philosophy* at the University of Aberdeen in 2009, and I am grateful to the participants at this workshop for feedback on the talk. Thanks also go to David Bloor, Peter Graham, Jesper Kallestrup, Martin Kusch, Bob Plant, Christopher Ranalli, Claudio Salvatore and Crispin Wright for helpful discussion on related topics. Special thanks go to Cameron Boult, Annalisa Coliva and Allan Hazlett who sent me detailed comments on an earlier version of this paper. This paper was written while I was in receipt of a Phillip Leverhulme Prize.